

Increasing Compliance by Legitimizing Paltry Contributions: When Even a Penny Helps

Robert B. Cialdini and David A. Schroeder
Arizona State University

Two experiments were conducted in a door-to-door charity drive context to examine the effectiveness of a technique for solving the dilemma of small requests. The dilemma of small requests is that while they serve to make a target person's compliance highly likely, they also tend to produce low-level payoffs for the requester. A procedure was developed to avoid the dilemma by legitimizing rather than requesting the delivery of a minimal favor. Thus, it was predicted that a solicitor who implied that a very small favor was acceptable but not necessarily desirable would make it difficult for a target to decline to help and, at the same time, make it unlikely that the target would actually offer a low grade of assistance. In confirmation of this prediction, a door-to-door solicitor for charity was able to increase significantly the frequency of donations while leaving unaffected the size of the donations by adding the sentence, "Even a penny will help," to a standard request for funds. Experiment 2 replicated this result and provided evidence for the legitimization-of-small-favors explanation of the effect.

A growing number of studies have focused on the question of which factors affect a person's willingness to comply with a request. Researchers have investigated the influence of such variables as mood states, both positive (e.g., Isen & Levin, 1972) and negative (e.g., Cialdini, Darby, & Vincent, 1973), attraction (e.g., Goodstadt, 1971), norms (e.g., Cialdini, Vincent, Lewis, Catalan, Wheeler, & Darby, 1975; Regan, 1971), self-concept (e.g., Freedman & Fraser, 1966), modeling (e.g., Wagner & Wheeler, 1969), and cost (e.g., Darley & Latané, 1970). The last of these factors, cost of performing the request, seems perhaps the least interesting. After all, it is hardly a controversial statement that the cost of performing a request will affect the likelihood that a target person will comply with it. In support of this statement, the research evidence (e.g., Darley & Latané, 1970; Latané & Darley, 1970; Suedfeld, Bochner, & Wnek, 1972; Wagner & Wheeler, 1969) strongly suggests that one

way of enhancing the probability of a target's compliance with a request is to reduce its size considerably.

It may well be, however, that small requests are so frequently complied with not just because they involve minimal costs and hence make it easy for a target to say yes, but because such requests also make it difficult for a target to say no. That is, when confronted with a minor request, a target person is hard put to argue for an inability to comply. It becomes awkward, for example, to claim that one does not have the wherewithal to provide the money, time, effort, etc., necessary to satisfy a request for minimal assistance. In addition to eliminating a variety of excuses for failing to help, small requests may be hard to refuse, since to do so would make it difficult for an individual to avoid giving the impression of being an especially unhelpful person. The problem of a minimal request strategy, however, is that very small favors, in themselves, are often unsatisfactory. Thus, while minimal requests are likely to lead to high percentages of compliance, they are unlikely to produce highly desirable outcomes for the requester.

The dilemma of minimal requests, that they produce high levels of compliance but low levels of reward for a requester, may be

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Requests for reprints should be sent to Robert B. Cialdini, Department of Psychology, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona 85281.

avoided by a skillful solicitor. For instance, Freedman and Fraser (1966) have demonstrated that a target person who complied with an initial request was at a later time more likely to comply with a substantially larger second request. A requester might be well advised, then, to ask for a miniscule first favor so that, upon the target's agreement, the probability of a subsequent, more desirable favor would be enhanced. A second, more streamlined solution to the dilemma of minimal requests may exist as well. Rather than directly requesting a small favor, a solicitor could simply *legitimize* the receipt of such a favor and thereby reap the benefits but not the disadvantages of minimal requests. That is, by implying that a minute favor is acceptable but not necessarily desirable, a requester could make it difficult for a target to refuse to provide some measure of help and could simultaneously make it unlikely that the target would offer a low level of assistance. To test this possibility, an initial, exploratory study was performed in a naturalistic, door-to-door fund-raising context. Subjects, middle-class suburban home owners, were asked to contribute money to the American Cancer Society in one of two ways. In the first method, a standard request for funds was made. In the second strategy, the standard request was followed by the sentence, "Even a penny will help." Because this phrase implied that a single penny was an acceptable donation but did not suggest, as small requests normally do, that it was what the requester desired, we expected that it would be an especially effective compliance technique. It was predicted, then, that (a) target persons exposed to the request addendum, "Even a penny will help," would be significantly more likely to decide to contribute but (b) once the decision to help had been made, these contributors would provide the same size donation as those exposed to the standard request.

EXPERIMENT 1

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 84 adult residents of a middle-income suburban housing area that had not been canvassed for funds by the American Cancer Society within the year.

Procedure. With the collaboration of the local branch of the American Cancer Society, four pairs of college-aged research assistants were equipped with the identification badges, information brochures, and donation envelopes employed in American Cancer Society door-to-door funding drives. The pairs, a male and a female, approached a home and addressed the first adult who came to the door. The experimental solicitor who was of the same sex as the target person delivered the request for funds. The experiment was conducted at times (late afternoons, evenings, and the weekend) designed to equalize the appearance of both male and female targets in the sample. A solicitor introduced himself or herself and stated, "I'm collecting money for the American Cancer Society." In half of the instances (control condition), the solicitor then delivered a standard plea for funds, "Would you be willing to help by giving a donation?" In the other half of the instances (even-a-penny condition), the solicitor again gave the standard plea but added, "Even a penny will help." Two measures of helping were taken: (a) whether a target gave a contribution and (b) size of the contribution.

Results

With respect to the percentage of contributors and the total amount contributed in the two treatment conditions, no differences were found due to sex of the target person; hence, all analyses were conducted with the sex factor collapsed. As predicted, the even-a-penny condition produced a significantly higher frequency of compliance than did the control condition: Out of 42 possible subjects, 12 (28.6%) of the control subjects gave, whereas 21 (50%) of the even-a-penny subjects gave, $\chi^2(1) = 4.04$, $p < .05$. Further, among those persons who donated, there were no differences in the size of individual contributions between the conditions. In both conditions, a dollar donation was the median and modal contribution among those who gave; similarly there was no difference in the mean donation per active contributor (\$1.44 vs. \$1.54), $t(31) = .51$, *ns*.¹ Given this pattern of results, it is not surprising that the even-a-penny condition (\$30.34) proved to be superior to the control condition (\$18.55) along the practical dimension of total funds obtained.

Discussion

As we had expected, the addition of the sentence, "Even a penny will help," to a standard request for funds substantially increased the likelihood of compliance with the request while leaving unaffected the size of

¹ Because the donation amounts were not normally distributed, all of the parametric tests reported in this article concerning monetary donations involve log ($X + 1$) transformations of the data.

individual contributions. It is our argument that this sentence produced an enhanced frequency of compliance because it legitimized the giving of paltry contributions and thereby made it difficult for a target person to decline to help. When the most minimal of monetary donations is said to be acceptable, excuses for failing to help that might ordinarily be offered (e.g., "I can't afford to give to all the various charities"; "We're too low on money this week," etc.) become inapplicable. Further, the refusal to provide "even a penny" of aid might cause one to feel guilty or ashamed or might jeopardize one's image as a helpful, socially responsible person. Thus, it is our contention that the even-a-penny condition made compliance less avoidable because it rendered legitimate even the most minimal kind of help.

However, an alternative explanation exists as well. Perhaps the success of the even-a-penny condition had nothing to do with the legitimization of small favors but rather was produced by an increased perception of the American Cancer Society's *need* for assistance. That is, it is conceivable that the sentence, "Even a penny will help," caused subjects who heard it to perceive the American Cancer Society to be in greater need of money than did subjects in the control condition; for this reason, then, they may have been more likely to donate funds. In order to test this alternative interpretation and to test some implications of the legitimization hypothesis, a second, larger experiment was done.

Experiment 2 involved four conditions. Two of the conditions (control and even-a-penny) were designed to be similar to those of Experiment 1, so as to provide a replication of our earlier findings. A third condition (even-a-dollar) was included to test the assertion of the legitimization hypothesis that it is the legitimization of *minimal* favors that accounts for the effectiveness of the even-a-penny condition. Subjects in this condition heard a standard request for funds followed by the sentence, "Even a dollar will help." Since, for the reasons already suggested, it should be easier to refuse to help when a dollar is presented as the lowest acceptable donation, we expected that subjects in this condition

would not show the high degree of compliance of those in the even-a-penny group and would not be significantly different from control subjects.² A final condition (social legitimization) was run in order to compare the legitimization and need explanations. The ambiguity of the even-a-penny condition was that while it stated that very small donations were legitimate ones, it may have also implied that the charity agency was badly in need of funding. The social legitimization condition avoided this interpretational problem by legitimizing minimal help in a way that did not suggest that the charity agency was desperate for money. The solicitor in this condition legitimized paltry donations by saying, "We've already received contributions ranging from a penny on up." Here, then, a penny donation was legitimized via the information that *others* had given only a penny. At the same time, the perception that the charity agency was severely needful of funds should have been greatly reduced. In keeping with the legitimization interpretation, it was predicted that the compliance rate in the social legitimization condition would be similar to that of the even-a-penny condition and superior to that of the control and even-a-dollar conditions.

An additional procedure was employed to assess the influence of the perception of need in our data. Some subjects in each condition were not asked to provide a donation but, instead, an indication of the American Cancer Society's need for money after hearing the request. In this way it was possible to test indirectly the need explanation of our results.

EXPERIMENT 2

Method

Subjects. The subjects were 169 suburban home owners who resided in an area similar to that of Experiment 1.

Procedure. Four mixed-sex pairs of college-aged solicitors who were different from those of Experiment 1 and who were blind to the critical experimental hypotheses approached target homes and addressed the first adult who came to the door. When approaching each of the 123 subjects petitioned for a donation, the solicitor said, "I'm col-

² A dollar was chosen because it was the most frequently offered contribution of Experiment 1.

lecting money for the American Cancer Society." In the control condition, the solicitor continued by making the standard request: "We've already received some contributions, and I wonder if you would be willing to help by giving a donation." In the even-a-penny condition, the standard request was followed by the sentence, "Even a penny will help." In the even-a-dollar condition, the standard request was followed by the sentence, "Even a dollar will help." In the social legitimization condition, the solicitor modified the standard request somewhat: "We've already received some contributions, ranging from a penny on up, and I wonder if you would be willing to help by giving a donation." For these subjects the dependent measures, frequency and size of contribution, were the same as in Experiment 1.

To the 46 subjects who were asked to provide a perception of monetary need, the solicitor represented himself or herself as doing a survey on how people perceived the need for money of charity organizations that conduct door-to-door fund-raising drives. The solicitor then showed the subject a 7-point "need for money" scale with categories ranging from 0 (not at all in need) to 6 (extremely in need) and asked:

How much in need of money would you believe a charitable organization, such as the American Cancer Society, to be if one of its representatives came to the door and asked for a contribution in the following way?

At this point, the solicitor provided, verbatim, the request sequence of one of the four conditions of the study. For these subjects the dependent measure was the perceived degree of need they indicated on the scale.

Results

Table 1 presents the results for frequency of donation, total amount donated, and perceived need scores in each of our four groups. No reliable sex effects were obtained; how-

ever, there was a marginally significant tendency for females to be more compliant in the even-a-dollar condition than males, $\chi^2(1) = 2.14$, $p < .15$.

Need scores. A one-way analysis of variance on the need scores revealed that they were not reliably different from one another, $F(3, 42) < 1$.

Donations. It was predicted that the even-a-penny and social legitimization conditions would be alike in frequency of donations and that both would be superior to the control condition. It was also expected that the even-a-dollar condition would not produce a reliably greater frequency of donations than the control condition. This pattern of predictions seemed most appropriately tested by a set of three orthogonal comparisons. The first contrasted the even-a-penny and social legitimization groups and found no difference, $\chi^2(1) = .27$, *ns*. The second compared the control and even-a-dollar groups and also found no significant difference, $\chi^2(1) = 1.34$, *ns*. The third tested the combination of the even-a-penny and social legitimization conditions against the combination of the control and even-a-dollar conditions and yielded a strongly significant effect, $\chi^2(1) = 5.93$, $p < .015$.

As in Experiment 1, there were no treatment differences in the size of individual contributions among those subjects who provided a donation. Again the median and modal contribution for those who gave was a dollar in each condition; and again, there were no differences due to condition in the mean size of these contributions, $F(3, 119) = 1.04$, *ns*.³ In

TABLE 1
PERCENTAGE OF SUBJECTS DONATING, TOTAL AMOUNT CONTRIBUTED, AND NEED SCORES
IN EXPERIMENT 2

Treatment	Measure		
	% giving	Total amount given (in \$)	Mean need score ^a
Control	32.2 (10/31)	20.74	3.30 (10)
Even-a-dollar	46.7 (14/30)	19.35	2.67 (12)
Social legitimization	64.5 (20/31)	28.61	2.83 (12)
Even-a-penny	58.1 (18/31)	31.30	3.42 (12)

Note. The need scores were obtained from a scale ranging from 0 (not at all in need) to 6 (extremely in need). Parentheses indicate *ns*.

^a $MS_e = 1.52$.

³ While it might appear at first glance that the control condition mean contribution (\$2.07) for subjects who donated is larger than that of the other groups (\$1.74, \$1.43, and \$1.38 for the even-a-penny, social legitimization, and even-a-dollar conditions, respectively), this is a somewhat illusory result in that the size of the control mean is largely due to a single \$10 donation that is five times as great as the next largest control donation. If this extreme contribution were removed, the mean of the other control donations would be \$1.19. The similar procedure of removing the single largest contribution resulted in comparable means for each of the other conditions (even-a-penny $M = \$1.25$; social legitimization $M = \$1.26$; even-a-dollar $M = \$1.24$). The standard deviations for the various conditions both before and after removal of the largest con-

terms of the practical measure of total funds donated, the pattern of results also replicated that of Experiment 1. The conditions that legitimized small contributions, even-a-penny (\$31.30) and social legitimization (\$28.61), produced a greater total than those that did not, control (\$20.74) and even-a-dollar (\$19.35), $t(119) = 2.28$, $p < .05$.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Both Experiments 1 and 2 provided evidence for a solution to the dilemma of small requests. By legitimizing rather than directly requesting minimal favors, it was possible to achieve high rates of compliance but not the low-level outcomes usually associated with such requests. Experiment 1 showed that informing request targets in a charity drive that paltry contributions were acceptable through the sentence, "Even a penny will help," significantly increased the frequency of donations without markedly decreasing the size of the donations. Experiment 2 replicated Experiment 1 and supported the legitimization mediator of the effect by demonstrating that the legitimization of small requests via modeling information (social legitimization) had effects upon donation behavior that were similar to those obtained when solicitors used the sentence, "Even a penny will help." Experiment 2 also indicated that it was the legitimization of a small donation that produced the salubrious effect upon contributions in that the sentence, "Even a dollar would help," failed to produce a greater compliance rate or total amount contributed than did a standard request control condition. Finally, Experiment 2 provided some evidence against a perceived need interpretation of the data of Experiment 1. While subjects' perceptions of the charity agency's need were generally in line with what would be expected from the various treatments, these perceptions occurred in a pattern that could not account for the donation data. In all, then, the legitimization-of-small-favors hypothesis appears to

be supported by the data of these experiments.

It is the case, however, that one aspect of the data allows for alternative explanations to the legitimization hypothesis. While, as predicted, the two experimental conditions designed to legitimize small favors produced the highest compliance levels of Experiment 2, neither of those conditions elicited significantly more compliance than the even-a-dollar condition. It is conceivable, then, that the only meaningful difference in the data exists between the control conditions and the (undifferentiated) experimental conditions of our studies. Perhaps any addition to the standard wording of the control request would have produced an equivalent enhancement of compliance, and hence, the legitimization mediator may not be as strongly supported as we have suggested. Two considerations weaken such a possibility, however. First, while the three experimental conditions of Experiment 2 were not significantly different among themselves, they were differentially distinct from the control condition. Both the social legitimization, $\chi^2(1) = 6.46$, $p < .011$, and even-a-penny, $\chi^2(1) = 4.16$, $p < .041$, conditions were superior to the control condition at conventional levels of significance, but the even-a-dollar condition was not, $\chi^2(1) = 1.34$, *ns*. Second, it is not at all incompatible with the legitimization hypothesis that the even-a-dollar condition was somewhat superior to the control condition in frequency of compliance. We argued that a donation amount that was perceived as small and defined as acceptable to the requesters would lead to compliance because noncompliance would be difficult to support with appropriate excuses and would be likely to jeopardize personal image. Earlier in this article it was predicted that these reasons for compliance would be less applicable to the even-a-dollar condition than the even-a-penny condition because the lowest acceptable donation was not as small. However, for many of our subjects, a one-dollar request by the American Cancer Society may have been perceived as a small one. Indeed, among the donors in the control conditions of these studies, nearly a third spontaneously gave more than a dollar contribution, with the

tribution are as follows: for control, $SDs = 2.82$ and $.47$; for even-a-penny, $SDs = 2.32$ and 1.10 ; for social legitimization, $SDs = 1.32$ and 1.07 ; for even-a-dollar, $SDs = .63$ and $.43$.

smallest such donation being twice as large as the dollar request and the average being more than $3\frac{1}{2}$ times as great. Thus, while it is likely that all of the subjects in the even-a-penny conditions saw the penny request as a small one, it appears that a substantial portion of subjects in the even-a-dollar condition may have seen the dollar request as a small one as well. Thus, the intermediate level of compliance obtained in the even-a-dollar condition is not inconsistent with the legitimization-of-small-favors model. Nonetheless, the possibility that the legitimization hypothesis does not best account for the results of these experiments still exists, and future work should be directed to test its validity further.

There is, of course, a practical value to our results as well. The findings suggest that a highly effective approach to asking a favor might be to legitimize but not specifically request trivial aid from a target person. It appears that such a procedure makes it unlikely that the target will refuse to help or offer substandard forms of assistance. Thus, the total amount of money collected in both experiments in the conditions designed to legitimize small favors (\$90.31) was more than $1\frac{1}{2}$ times that of comparison conditions (\$58.64). Combining the probability levels for the appropriate tests of Experiments 1 and 2 (i.e., even-a-penny vs. control in Experiment 1 and even-a-penny plus social legitimization vs. control plus even-a-dollar in Experiment 2) shows this to be a strongly significant effect ($Z = 2.58$, $p < .01$). It remains to be seen, however, whether our tech-

nique would be effective in contexts other than those involving monetary requests.

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